

11 September 1963

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Repression by the Diem Government

1. The government's recent crackdown on Buddhist pagodas is major critics and widespread arrests of students are current examples of the Diem regime's repressive tactics. Other repressive actions by the government down through the years are less well known and are summarized below:

2. The broadest form of repression in South Vietnam and the one which has most alienated the country's small educated elite is the blanket suppression of criticism of the regime and the prohibition of any organized opposition activity. Any organized activity, even by a small group, requires a permit. Authorization is systematically denied to all groups not supporting the regime or which do not permit the regime to control and monitor their activities. By this device, political movements other than those favorable to the regime have been suppressed. Individuals or members of groups openly criticizing the government are frequently detained and questioned, and sometimes incarcerated.

3. The suppression of private criticism, even by persons within the regime, is more subtle, but has operated to alienate many talented persons who originally supported the regime. The method of control has in part been the semi-clandestine tan hsin organization, whose loyal members are favored in jobs and promotions in the civil service and military. Tan hsin members maintain a network of surveillance on the attitudes of their colleagues. It has also been a noted fact of life in South Vietnam that officials showing independence of thought and often merely superior performance are shunted aside from positions of responsibility in favor of regime favorites.

4. The government maintains an extensive system of political detention camps, known as reeducation centers. The current population of these camps is not fully known, but numbers well in the thousands. Many inmates, of course, are Viet Cong sympathizers or agents, but many others are not.

5. The country's judicial branch operates as an extension of the executive. A system of military courts, which allows Viet Cong prisoners to be tried locally, also includes a permanent military tribunal with the power to apply the death sentence to persons accused of political subversion. Death sentences by the court, however, have not yet been carried out. (It is significant to note that since the 1960 coup attempt, not one execution is known to have been carried out, although some coup leaders still at large have been sentenced to death in absentia.) There is no observance of habeas corpus and suspected opponents of the regime are often imprisoned for long periods without trial, or even without formal charges being preferred.

6. Despite the trappings of free national elections, election regulations are designed to ensure the victory of government picked candidates. Except for two individuals--now in prison--means have been found to prevent the seating of true oppositionists elected to the National Assembly.

7. De facto press censorship has long been imposed. On several occasions, and most recently in the case of the Saigon newspaper Tu Do this month, local newspapers have been summarily closed down and their offices and equipment smashed by police.

8. Buddhist charges of repression by the government prior to 8 May 1963 cannot be fully substantiated or totally refuted. Between 8 May and 20-21 August there were numerous eyewitness reports of police brutality against Buddhist demonstrators--although the majority of demonstrations were not interfered with--as well as reliable reports of night arrests, and isolated beatings and killings. Beating of political prisoners has frequently been reported in the past.

9. Since 20-21 August, use of force against students has been widely publicized, along with arrests, but casualties have remained few. There is less reliable information on political arrests, but reports of some arrests of prominent individuals have been received [REDACTED]

10. On a more general scale, there have been long reports of abuse of the populace on the part of local civilian officials and military troops. Some of these are being corrected. However, abuses which were prevalent in the government's agrville program of 1959-60--resettlement involving peasant forced labor and extortion--are reported to persist in some areas of the Strategic Hamlet program.